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Boston-Montreal rail line on a roll at Lowell summit

By DENNIS SHAUGHNESSEY
Sun Correspondent

LOWELL -- If you build it they will come -- just not any time soon.

A high-speed rail line from Boston to Montreal is in the initial planning stages, with service an estimated five or 10 years away. But a group of regional planners, engineers and transportation officials at a seminar hosted by the Lowell Regional Transit Authority last night were enthusiastic about the possibility.

Ronald O'Blenis, senior project manager from Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas, provided an overview of the ongoing feasibility study sponsored, in part, by the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont and the Federal Railroad Administration.

In late 2000, the Boston-to-Montreal corridor was designated by the FRA as one of the nation's three new high-speed rail corridors.

"Our primary objective in the first phase of the project is to identify the ridership," O'Blenis said. "Will there be enough people to ride it to justify moving into the second phase?"

O'Blenis said the study is focusing on developing preliminary service projections, identifying institutional and policy issues, such as the border crossing in Quebec, and compiling information on existing railways.

Leaving from Boston, the 325-mile trip would make its way through Lowell and

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proceed over the Granite State border on the Guilford Rail System through Nashua, Manchester and Concord. It would then turn to the northwest, following the former Boston & Maine Railroad Northern Line from Concord to White River Junction, Vt., and crossing the Connecticut River. From there it would travel through Vermont, past Montpelier and up to Burlington, linking with the Canadian National Railroad in Alburg, Vt., to Central Station in Montreal.

Robert Kennedy, administrator of the Lowell Regional Transit Authority, was excited by the prospect of Lowell becoming a pivotal stop.

"This would be a great economic generator," Kennedy said. "Combining a high-speed rail with intermodal transportation will bring tremendous benefits to the region. There are many opportunities before us and I hope Lowell will be at the center."

A potential snag lies in the fact that the New Hampshire rail line between Concord and Lebanon is no longer operational, but O'Blenis said working out those details are way down the road.

"We are not getting into details at this point," he said. "We are simply trying to get an expanded vision of what could happen."

O'Blenis could not specify the number of stops that will be proposed, but said the fewer the better.

"Minimizing the number of stations is one of the things that makes a high-speed rail a high-speed rail," he said.

No specific railroad has been designated to run the service, although a number of rail carriers would be directly affected by infrastructure improvements to the corridor, including the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Amtrak, Springfield Terminal in Guilford, the Northern Vermont Railroad, New England Central and Canadian National.

"It's not assumed that Amtrak or any other carrier would run the service," O'Blenis said.

Donald Leblanc, public affairs director for the Quebec government, was also excited by the venture.

"Montreal has a population of about 3 million, much like Boston. Both cities have a large amount of high-tech jobs and a high number of students. Both cities can be considered the hub of activity. It's exciting to think 10 years ahead," Leblanc said.

Peter Roudebush, a land-use planner and transportation consultant from

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Cambridge, said he would prefer a rail system that allows for a more leisurely trip through the countryside.

"I go to Vermont to go slower," he said. "The trip from Boston to Montreal should be a delightful experience, although I know that the Federal Railroad Administration is looking at going faster."

O'Blenis said Boston-to-Montreal rail service would help alleviate congestion along the interstate highways, and could provide closer connecting points to the four major airports along the corridor -- Logan, Manchester International, Burlington International and Dorval in Montreal.

"Other train routes along the way would all help support each other," he said.

O'Blenis hesitated putting a time line on the project, but said the process is extensive. He estimated the completion of the first phase sometime in September.

Scott Bascom, a planning coordinator for the Vermont Agency of Transportation, said the project will closely follow the guidelines set forth by the FRA.

"They are quite detailed in what they ask for," Bascom said. "The second phase would more fully address the issues of how many stations and specific locations. It's more of a hard science."

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